

Stephen I. Wright. *Alive to the Word: A Practical Theology of the Preaching for the Whole Church*. London: SCM Press, 2010. 224 pages. \$35.

Alive to the Word is a unique addition to preaching annals because it is designed with the “gathered community” (5) as a central and critical participant in the theological reflective process. The book is a practical theological guide to generating reflective analysis of the preaching task from the perspective of both preacher and hearer.

Stephen Wright is an Anglican priest who serves as the Director of Research and Professor of Biblical Studies and Practical Theology at Spurgeon College in London, United Kingdom. In this book, he seeks to develop a “theological understanding of the Christian ministry of preaching” (xi) by examining the theological implications and role of preaching in a postmodern world. He also identifies additional areas of research.

Wright asserts that, “All we do is to be understood theologically, and our lives are a perpetual ebb and flow between God inspired action and God directed reflection.” (xiii) Consequently, the author relies on practical theology to advocate for theological contemplation and engagement with the Church. He uses Richard Osmer’s work *Practical Theology* (2008) as the categorical framework for his four part manuscript: Part I — the descriptive-empirical task: priestly listening (chapters 1–2); Part II — the interpretive task: sagely wisdom (chapters 3–4); Part III — the normative tasks: prophetic discernment (chapters 5–8); Part IV — the pragmatic task: servant leadership (chapters 9–10).

In Chapter 1, Wright defines the preaching task and provides a pithy survey of the historical phenomenon of preaching in various settings (i.e., Christian community, Christian church, beyond the walls of gathered community). Chapter 2 focuses on the contemporary functions of preaching accentuated in shared worship, theology, contemporary culture, and pastoral care. He states “all of us have received faith embedded in cultural clothing.” (19) Therefore, Wright admonishes preachers to acknowledge and reflect their theological influences that shape the form and content of sermons and the development of congregational mindsets.

Chapters 3–4 address the function of language in preaching. Recognizing that the “event of communication is more complex than a simple delivery of a message,” (38) Wright shares concise multidisciplinary insights regarding the evocative nature of preaching. He also discusses the “medium and message” aspect of language from a contemporary point of view, arguing for openness to other forms of the medium than the Bible while maintaining the centrality of Scripture. For example, he asserts that “contemporary visual media may turn out to be equally appropriate and effective vehicles in some circumstances for teaching, delighting and persuading a congregation in Christ-centered biblical truth.” (55) *Alive to the Word* acknowledges the mysterious intervening of God beyond the feeble words of the preacher and takes seriously the theological implications of Christology.

Chapters 5–8 suggest the normative tasks for preaching. Chapter 5 discusses the normative nature of Scripture and its authority by “sharing moments in the chronological unfolding of God’s purpose” (85) as depicted in the teaching from God (Torah), voicing prophecy, Jesus of Nazareth, apostolic announcements, and gathering the testimony together (Christian narrative). Chapter 6 deals with the central theological claims about God’s revelation and self-disclosure observed in preaching. Wright effectively communicates that God is *still* speaking through his discussion and analysis of Christ over Scripture, Christ of Scripture, and the Christ of today as foreshadowed by Scripture. Chapter 7 confers Wright’s six theological approaches to the ethical nature of preaching in which he challenges the preacher to be listener, gospeller, interpreter of Scripture and world, and speaker of truth to power. Chapter 8 illustrates how theological assumptions affect preaching as categorized by

four major sermon types (i.e., liturgical, teaching, evangelistic, and street). Chapters 9–10 identify the specific tasks and responsibilities for the church and the preacher respectively.

I commend this book as a great primer for engaging in theological conversations and pedagogy. However, based on its design and content, the best use of this book is in relationship with a gathered community that is willing to engage in the same type of deep reflection suggested. This presents both a strength and weakness of the book. Its strength is its intentional effort to engage the gathered community in theological reflection. Its weakness is that without a committed gathered community's participation, the preacher lacks the critical conversational and feedback partner that engenders the communal exegesis practice. That being said, *Alive to the Word* provides a refreshing synthesis of theory and praxis as it pertains to preaching. The final benefit is Wright's multidisciplinary compilation of bibliographies that is sure to enhance one's library.

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